

The role of violence in beowulf

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



It is clear that violence, or at least military action plays an important role in the world of Beowulf. The events in Beowulf's life are strongly connected to combat: he saves the Kingdom of Denmark by defeating both Grendel and his mother; he serves as the King of Geatland's advisor and champion; he is elected King of Geatland after the former king and his son are killed in battle and successfully for fifty years; and he kills the fire-monster and save Geatland (Slade; Bullfinch).

The violence in Beowulf does not appear to be engaged in gratuitously, for its own sake, or out of cruelty. Instead, the violence serves as a tool to achieve various goals. The men in Beowulf engage in violence in defense against an attack, threat or as Hill suggests, a feud. Military action is used as a method of getting wealth and additional territory. Lastly the use of violence is seen in terms of good versus evil, with Beowulf and his people in the role of the good.

Both of the major scenes of violence in the poem are aimed at specific targets and occur as responses to attacks made by Grendel, his mother, the lady troll-wife on Denmark, and by the dragon that attacks Geatland. When Beowulf saves the kingdom of Denmark from destruction at the claws of Grendel he is responding to the attacks Grendel has been making on the Danish court. Hrothgar, king of Denmark, was ". . . success in warcraft given,/honour in war, so that his retainers/ eagerly served him until the young war-band grew/into a mighty battalion" (Slade, 64-66).

As a result of his success he decides to build a " mead-hall" where he can give his wealth to " young and old, such as God gave him" (Slade, 72). The poem does not tell us against whom Hrothgar has fought to gain his wealth,

but the description of his lineage is a positive one that does not lend itself to indiscriminate attacks and raiding (Slade 1-63). When the Danes are unable to defeat Grendel Beowulf leads a group of men and succeeds in killing Grendel and, when she seeks revenge on Beowulf the next day, Grendel's mother.

Although Beowulf's purpose was to save Denmark from Grendel, due to his great deed, Beowulf receives both wealth and reputation. He returns to his own country: Geatland. There he serves the country well, ultimately becoming King of Geatland. After Beowulf had been king for fifty years, a dragon attacks the country; Beowulf is the only one who will fight it. He succeeds in killing the dragon, but is killed during the fight. It is clear the people in the world of Beowulf used violence to gain both wealth and honor. As mentioned above Hrothgar has made his fortune by military action.

Since Hrothgar is not condemned for his acts, but is celebrated by men and given gifts from the gods, in fact the poet tells us that Hrothgar is " old and good" (Slade 130) Based on this it appears unlikely that such a method of gaining wealth was considered inappropriate, but is a tool to be used to gain wealth. Beowulf himself leaves Denmark with a great wealth of gold and an honorable reputation for his abilities to fight. Since Beowulf is the celebrated hero of the poem it appears certain that violence as a means to wealth is accepted by the people in the world of the poem.

The people in the poem regard themselves as engaging in the universal fight between good and evil with themselves fight on the side of goodness. The poet tells us that Grendel was " condemned with the kin of Cain" (Slade) and a result of the feud between Abel and Cain, i. e. , good versus evil (Slade <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-violence-in-beowulf/>)

106-114). Consequently when Beowulf fights against Grendel, his mother, and the dragon, he is fighting against creatures that were brought into being when Cain murdered his brother.

Kennedy proposes that not only does Beowulf describe the battle between good and evil, but contains " a deeply pervasive infusion of Christian spirit coloring thought and judgment, governing motive and action, a continuous and active agent in the process of transformation" (Kennedy, xlix). Gordon takes a more conservative approach and points out that Christianity did not supplant the native pagan beliefs all at once, but co-existed in Northern Europe at this time (Gordon 1). It is evident that violence plays an important part in the live and traditions of the people of the poem.

It appears however that instead of indiscriminate raiding, raping, and pillaging one associates with the Vikings, violence was seen as a tool for defense, building wealth, and participating in the fight against evil. However it must be remembered that Beowulf presents only the side of the Danes and the Geats and does not tell how the people who lost their lives and wealth to Hrothgar viewed these people.

Works Cited

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